The Wahhabi Relations With the gulf

Abstract

This document offers a focused historical study of the Second Saudi State (Imamate of Nejd, c. 1824–1891) and its diplomatic, military, and economic interactions with key Gulf polities notably Bahrain**,** Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Oman during the mid-nineteenth century. Based on the archival research and syntheses of prominent historian Charles Beckham, and supported by both Arabic and British contemporary accounts, the analysis traces Imam Faisal bin Turki's maritime ambitions, tributary arrangements, and episodic confrontations (notably the 1847 and 1851 campaigns). It examines how internal Gulf rivalries, tribal allegiances, and the growing intervention of British maritime powershaped the outcomes of Saudi outreach to the coast. The document situates each episode within a chronological framework, emphasizing causation, negotiations, and the treaties that ultimately constrained Saudi influence in the Gulf

Relations Between the Second Saudi State and Bahrain (1833–1838)

Following the restoration of the Second Saudi State under Imam Faisal bin Turki Al Saud, relations with the Gulf principalities became a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy. The Emirate of Nejd, centered in Riyadh, sought to reassert its historical influence over the eastern coast of Arabia particularly the regions of Al-Ahsa, Qatif, Bahrain, and Qatar, where Wahhabi authority had previously been recognized during the First Saudi State. However, the collapse of the First State in 1818 and the subsequent Egyptian occupation left a vacuum in the Gulf. When Faisal reestablished Saudi rule in the 1830s, he faced a new geopolitical landscape: British naval dominance, the resurgence of the Al Khalifa dynasty in Bahrain, and growing Omani and Abu Dhabi ambitions along the coast. In 1833, Sheikh Abdullah bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, ruler of Bahrain, took advantage of instability within Najd following the assassination of Prince Turki bin Abdullah. With the Saudis temporarily weakened, Abdullah renounced his submission to the Wahhabi Emir and openly defied Nejd's authority. To secure his independence, the Sheikh of Bahrain forged understandings with the Omani empire and gained support from tribes in Al-Ahsa, particularly branches of Bani Khalid, who began harassing Wahhabi positions under his encouragement. Emboldened, Sheikh Abdullah launched raids on the Saudi ports of Qatif and Uqair, and later besieged them. During this same period, the internal crisis in Riyadh deepened: Emir Turki was assassinated, and his nephew Mishari bin Abdul Rahman briefly

seized power. Bahraini sources even celebrated the murder, firing cannons in Manama to mark the death of the Wahhabi ruler an event some attributed to Bahraini intrigue.

Faisal bin Turki, after reclaiming his authority in 1834, responded by attempting to retake Tarut Island, which Bahrain had annexed during the turmoil. However, this campaign failed, largely due to British monitoring and Bahraini naval strength. In retaliation, the Sheikh of Bahrain renewed the blockade of Qatif, disrupting trade along the Saudi Gulf coast. Realizing that prolonged hostility would only expose both states to Egyptian and Persian threats, intermediaries facilitated negotiations between Faisal and Sheikh Abdullah. According to contemporary Arabic and British accounts, a truce was concluded between 1835 and 1836. The terms were pragmatic: the ruler of Bahrain would pay an annual tribute (zakat) of 2,000 rupees to the Emir of Nejd, while Imam Faisal pledged to protect Bahrain from external aggression. Faisal also assured that he would not demand Bahraini assistance in his planned campaigns against Oman a crucial clause reflecting both states' competing interests in Muscat. The agreement temporarily restored calm, and a Wahhabi agent was stationed in Bahrain to oversee correspondence and zakat payments.

The Short-Lived Alliance (1836–1838)

Despite this reconciliation, relations remained fragile. In 1836, Faisal's envoy in Bahrain attempted to enlist the ruler of Muscat and several coastal tribes in a joint attack on Bahrain's enemies, under Wahhabi auspices. The Omani ruler refused, citing his obligation to consult the British authorities before taking such action. With British oversight preventing any major escalation, Faisal's naval ambitions were checked. Meanwhile, both the Saudis and the Bahrainis faced new external dangers: the Egyptian advance into Al-Ahsa under Ibrahim Pasha's successors and Iranian interest in the Gulf islands. A temporary convergence of interests led to a pragmatic truce, where each sought to avoid provoking Britain or Egypt. Nevertheless, Saudi control in Qatif and Dammam was repeatedly tested. In 1838, Faisal's governor of Al-Ahsa, Amr bin Ufaisan, executed several Bani Khalid sheikhs accused of collaborating with Egyptian forces a decisive act that restored Wahhabi authority in the eastern coast but further alienated Bahrain's allies among the tribes. By the close of the 1830s, the balance of power in the Gulf had shifted: Britain's naval treaties bound the Trucial States and Bahrain, while Faisal's focus turned inland to secure his dominion in Nejd. Yet, the question of Bahrain's allegiance and the payment of zakat would soon reemerge, setting the stage for renewed conflict in the 1840s and 1850

Faisal bin Turki's Gulf Campaigns (1847 – 1851)

After consolidating his authority over Najd, Al-Ahsa, and Qatif, Imam Faisal bin Turki sought to revive the political and religious influence the First Saudi State had once held across the eastern shores of Arabia. By the mid-1840s, the Emirate of Nejd was stable enough for Faisal to turn his attention outward toward Bahrain, Qatar, and the Trucial Coast, where Wahhabi authority had historically been recognized but was now eroding under British protection treaties. In 1847, Faisal attempted to exploit internal divisions within the ruling Al Khalifa family of Bahrain. The island was then troubled by rival claims among Sheikh Muhammad bin Khalifa, Sheikh Ali bin

Khalifa, and Abdullah bin Ahmad Al Khalifa's sons. Faisal viewed this discord as an opportunity to restore the old arrangement in which Bahrain acknowledged Wahhabi suzerainty and paid zakat to Nejd.

He dispatched envoys and made preparations for a possible intervention, but the attempt failed to materialize into conquest. Bahraini resistance was strengthened by British diplomatic and naval support, which opposed any expansion of Saudi power in the Gulf. Moreover, Faisal was distracted by internal threats: Muhammad bin Awn, the Sharif of Mecca, and Khalid bin Saud launched attacks on Al-Qassim, forcing Faisal to redirect his forces westward. Although he failed to capture Bahrain, Faisal concluded a temporary peace stipulating that Bahrain would maintain its independence but acknowledge Nejd's spiritual authority through tribute payments.The British viewed even this symbolic acknowledgment as dangerous, seeing Faisal's ambitions as a revival of Wahhabi influence that could threaten their maritime supremacy. From this point onward, British policy became explicitly anti-Saudi in the Persian Gulf, monitoring Faisal's every movement through the political residency in Bushire.Undeterred by the setbacks of 1847, Faisal prepared a more coordinated expedition in 1851, targeting Bahrain indirectly through its dependency, Qatar. His strategy was to capture Al-Bidda (modern Doha) and use it as a staging ground for an invasion of the Bahraini islands.

In May 1851, Faisal ordered his son, Abdullah bin Faisal, to advance toward Al-Bidda. At the time, Qatar was nominally under Bahraini influence through its representative, Ali bin Khalifa Al Khalifa. Sensing the danger, Ali called upon the men of fighting age to defend Al-Bidda and urgently requested reinforcements from Saeed bin Tahnun Al Nahyan, ruler of Abu Dhabi, as well as aid from allied tribes. According to Wahhabi chronicler Uthman ibn Bishr, Abdullah bin Faisal besieged Al-Bidda Fort on 2 June 1851. The Bahraini-Qatari defenders under Ali bin Khalifa, were quickly overpowered and fled by sea to Bahrain, leaving behind their munitions. Faisal accepted the surrender of the Qatari tribes, who pledged allegiance to him and adopted the Wahhabi creed. However, British political resident Samuel Hennell reported a different version. In his dispatch to Arthur Malet in Bombay dated 18 June 1851, Hennell claimed that Faisal's forces were initially repelled on 2 June, and that further clashes at Mesaimeer on 4 June rendered the region unstable. By 6 June, Bahraini and Abu Dhabi contingents had evacuated Al-Bidda, after which Sheikh Mohammed bin Thani, the local Qatari chief, shifted allegiance to Faisal and allowed him to establish control. An alternative oral account preserved in Nasser bin Ali Al Thani's *Glimpses of Qatari History* narrates that the battle lasted three days. On the second day, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed Al Thani personally fought alongside the Qataris, killing the Wahhabi officer Fares Al-Otaibi in close combat, while the Bahraini detachments retreated to their ships. On the third day, the Saudis withdrew to Mesaimeer, and Mohammed bin Thani opened peace talks with Faisal, agreeing to recognize his authority.By 8 June, Qatari forces occupied the coastal Burj al-Ma'ah watchtower near Doha, prompting the final Bahraini evacuation to Manama. Faisal rebuked Mohammed bin Thani for failing to capture the fleeing sheikhs but accepted his allegiance. The events alarmed the British authorities in the Gulf. Sheikh Muhammad bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, fearing a joint Wahhabi-Qatari invasion, appealed to Resident Hennell for protection and even offered to accept British suzerainty in return. Initially, the British declined, but by 1 July 1851, London ordered the dispatch of several warships to Manama Harbor, declaring that any Saudi naval movement against Bahrain would be met with force. British diplomat Justin Sheil warned that Faisal's control of the Qatari Peninsula

would jeopardize imperial interests by opening the way for Ottoman influence. To counter this, British ships patrolled the waters between Qatif and Bahrain, while Hennell sent a stern letter to Mohammed bin Thani, forbidding any attack on Bahraini territory.

In response, the Bahraini ruler dispatched a fleet of 11 vessels carrying about 800 men commanded by Sheikh Ali bin Khalifa, to blockade Qatif Port. The blockade was soon challenged by a larger flotilla of 18 warships manned by Utubi exiles from Qais Island, allied with Faisal. A naval engagement ensued in which the Bahraini side suffered heavy losses, including the deaths of several Al Khalifa princes such as Mubarak bin Abdullah Al Khalifa and **Rashid** bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, as well as their ally Bashir bin Rahmah al-Jalhami. Despite this Wahhabi-aligned victory, the mounting British naval presence and diplomatic pressure made further conquest impossible. Recognizing the futility of continued conflict, Faisal sent envoys to negotiate peace. His initial attempt through Ahmad bin Mohammad al-Sudairi, chief of Al-Ahsa, was rebuffed by Ali bin Khalifa, who refused any talks “if you come with demands.” British ships stationed off Al-Bidda’s coast further guaranteed Bahraini security. Mediation efforts then passed to Saeed bin Tahnun Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi, supported by the Sultan of Muscat and the Sheikh of Sharjah. Their concern was not only the Saudi-Bahraini dispute but the regional instability Faisal’s presence in Qatar created. Saeed’s mediation succeeded by 25 July 1851, producing a treaty that ended hostilities.